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SOME NEEDED READJUSTMENTS IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR¹

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The function of grammar in the elementary curriculum is threefold. This may be illustrated by the following quotations from scholarly grammarians:

Mr Edwin H. Lewis emphasizes the relation of grammar to composition in the statement, "Elementary correctness and an elementary sentence sense should be the first objects of grammar study."² On the other hand, Mr. Edwin A. Abbott enforces the necessity of the study of grammar as a help to the interpretation of literature by saying: "In teaching grammar it ought not to be the teacher's object to enable the pupil to speak English but to understand it."³ A more fundamental purpose is expressed by Professor Whitney: "The real aim of grammar is to turn the light of intelligent reflection upon the instrumentality of thought, to see what is its structure in word and phrase, to look at these familiar facts and differences, their connections and relations: and this partly for its own sake, and partly for what it leads to."⁴ This same point of view is more tersely put by Professor Laurie: "Grammar is elementary logic."

However we may differ in comparative emphasis of these aims, we doubtless agree that these three values ought to be obtained from grammatical study: confidence and certitude in questions of correct English idiom; added power in extracting thought from the printed page; clear, incisive thinking. The quotations from Mr. Lewis and Mr. Abbott have primarily to do with grammar in its relation to composition and literature, while Professor Whitney

¹Read before the Elementary School Section of the National Council of Teachers of English, November 12, 1912.

²Quoted from Mary H. Leonard, *Grammar and Its Reasons*.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*

has stated an ideal basic to all education; an aim which grammar shares with other subjects in the curriculum and for the attainment of which grammar is specially adapted, dealing as it does with the very fiber of thought.

Curricula are too often legacies of the past rather than products of the time to meet the needs of the time. In this living subject of English the need of frequent readjustment is the more imperative because of the growth and change of the language. I wish to present for your consideration two general questions: First, Is the subject of English grammar as vitally articulated with the other English courses as is possible? Second, Are we making the most of English grammar as a disciplinary subject? Or, to state these questions more specifically: What readjustments, if any, are desirable in the relation of grammar to composition, to reading, and to literature? And how can the grammar course be made a more effective instrument in inducing clear thinking?

Let us first consider the topic, *Grammar in its relation to composition*. The study of syntax may be made genuinely helpful in fixing in the pupil's memory certain forms that good usage has established. For instance, if the child sees that "done" is not an assertive form of the verb, he is the better equipped to fight his habit of using "done" in the place of "did." A knowledge of construction thus gives the child a certain independence in correcting his own English. Correct usage, however, is after all a matter of habit, and unless frequent and adequate drill follows the grammatical interpretation of an idiom, the child will still speak and write the form he has been accustomed to use. And it is just here that we so frequently fail. We forget that bad habits are fought not so much by reason as by the formation of good habits. Consequently we teach the principal parts of "lay" and "lie"; perhaps we drill upon these distinctions for a day or two, and then we recur to the subject no more. It is little wonder that we are later disappointed to know that our pupils have utterly lost the distinction in usage. What we need is more continuous drill to establish habits in using the correct idiom, and we need, of course, to begin with this drill in the early grades, long before the child thinks of technical grammar. Even then effort seems in some cases almost hopeless, because of the language environment of the pupil.

In spite of the absurdities involved in the use of false syntax in the past, I believe we shall grow to value its use in connection with the teaching of grammar in the higher grades. If you require a child to correct an error and at the same time exact his reason for the correction, you are giving him the finest kind of drill in the principles of construction, and you are, moreover, stamping these forms as incorrect and therefore to be avoided. The argument that the use in the classroom of false syntax confuses the child would seem to be without foundation; for only those errors will be introduced, by any wise teacher, that are prevailingly made, those upon which the members of the class have been often corrected, constructions which both the teachers and the pupils have been fighting in the earlier grades. Now in the seventh and eighth grades the pupil is able to analyze these old enemies of his with a view to seeing wherein the faults lie. These incorrect forms are thus indelibly stamped upon his mind as wrong. The child who never makes these particular mistakes gets a valuable drill in construction as he states his reasons for the incorrectness of the illustrative sentences, and his habit of correct English is reaffirmed by his reason; while he who habitually makes these errors reaps all the benefit that his more fortunate classmate does, plus the very strong reminder of his own incorrect usage.

There is, however, a danger in connection with this manner of treating questions of correctness, and that is, deducing the false conclusion that good English is necessarily parsable; that the reason for the correctness of an idiom lies in its construction rather than in its general and accepted use. It was this feeling, doubtless, that led a board of city examiners to include among sentences to be corrected in a recent teachers' examination the idiom "had rather." It is this same feeling that leads teachers to lay great stress upon the incorrectness of such colloquial idioms as, "It is her," and "Who did you see?" I am inclined to believe, however, that we should be satisfied if our pupils use English idiom as spoken by university presidents and scholars of English.¹

Sometimes the rule that is supposed to serve as a help to the

¹In mooted questions of this character I prefer to abide by the conservative ruling; nevertheless, it is but fair to the pupil that he should know there is good authority for the use of these unparsable forms.

child in determining upon correct usage is so stated as to be of no value when he meets his concrete problem. A familiar instance of this is the rule concerning the distinction of "shall" and "will." We shall not now discuss the question whether it is worth while to continue teaching the formal distinction between these auxiliaries. Certain it is that many of our good writers do not observe the rule. Certain it is, also, that no sixth-, seventh-, or eighth-grade pupil can follow some grammarians through their complex and intricate explanation of all of the uses of these auxiliaries. The distinction in the large, however, can be made clear to the grammar-school boy or girl. Yet any teacher knows how insecure pupils are in the use of these auxiliaries, even after much drill, and I believe that most of this vagueness can usually be traced to the fact that the rule, as often stated, does not sufficiently emphasize the point of view of the speaker.

Every year I ask my classes to state the rule concerning the use of "shall" and "will." I never fail to get a statement of this character from most of the students. "'Will' with the first person and 'shall' with the second and third persons express determination. 'Shall' with the first person and 'will' with the second and third persons express futurity." Then I set them this problem: Which shall I say, "The boy *will* or *shall* go, he is so obstinate"? My classes always divide into three groups that by their strong feeling in the matter might almost be called factions. Members of one group are sure one should say, "The boy *shall* go, he is so obstinate," because the rule states that "shall" is used with the third person to show determination, and this sentence certainly expresses determination on the part of the boy. Most of them admit that "will" sounds better, but they say sound is no criterion. Those of another group declare that "will" is the correct form, and explain this sentence as an exception to the general rule. To them sound seems a safer criterion than rule. I am always so fortunate as to have a few who see that "will" is the right auxiliary and that it is used in accord with the rule. They see that when the rule states that "shall" is used with the third person to show determination, the speaker's determination is referred to, not the determination of the subject, and they also see that "will" here

does not show the speaker's determination, but only indicates his prophecy concerning the wilfulness of the boy. The class then restates the rule in really usable form: When the speaker is represented as predicting, "shall" is used with the first person and "will" with the second and third persons. When the speaker is represented as expressing his own determination, "will" is used with the first person and "shall" with the second and third persons.

This is only one of many instances which one could cite in which the rule that the pupil learns is an utterly worthless affair—just so much more useless lumber for the memory.

We have been dealing so far with matters of correctness. The question arises as to how and when we shall drill on these matters. I cannot discuss this part of my theme without encroaching upon the general subject of composition. Measured by their possibilities in cultural value, composition is infinitely superior to grammar. To be sure, the writing of compositions too often becomes an attempt to string together a few trite ideas in proper mechanical form and with grammatical and rhetorical correctness. Too often the child is made to feel that the oral telling of a story consists in stringing incidents together without mistakes in grammar or pronunciation. And this misconception of the function of composition comes from the fact that criticism too frequently stops with questions of detail, with the dotting of an *i* and the insertion of a "he" in the place of a "him," etc. The criticism is of that negative sort which paralyzes constructive effort. Composition has quite a different purpose from penmanship or dictation exercises or technical grammar. The composition hour should be a time for the child to experience something of the satisfaction, yes, the joy of the creative artist. He should feel as little untrammelled by rules and restrictions as possible in order that he may center himself on an absorbing idea. If the subject takes hold of him, his store of vital knowledge will be increased and his sympathy broadened in a really rich experience. We do not require composition because we believe many of the children are going to write when they leave school, but because the writing of compositions may crystallize knowledge and broaden and deepen spiritual experiences. But how about it if the child is made severely conscious, all the

time he is writing, of the dragons of correct idiom, correct spelling, or capitalization? Any imaginative glow, any individual touch which might have been there will not appear in a composition written under these conditions. As he grows older he will work on the principle that the form is more than the substance. Those of you who read book reviews written by high-school or normal-school pupils know the kind of theme-writer I am referring to, the writer who catches at the smooth, trite phrase to cover up his lack of thought. Composition writing of this sort, so far from giving the pupil any value, is absolutely useless—it induces mental flabbiness.

I have among my keepsakes a dear little composition on "The Coming of the Pilgrims." The author—and I use the term advisedly—is a dark little girl with snapping black eyes, whose name suggests sunny Italy. She belongs to the third grade. At the top of the first page is an attempt at illustration of the "Mayflower" on the Atlantic. To the uninitiated this picture seems like some unfortunate quadruped wallowing in black ink. Such grammatical monstrosities as "mens," and "did been" appear in the course of the narrative. Nor is the composition quite true to history. One feels, as he reads of the perilous voyage, that the "Mayflower" was very much like the ocean liner of today, and that the Puritans, although the only passengers on board, were occupying crowded steerage quarters. Yet with all its crudities and false conceptions, I call it a much better composition than many a faultlessly written theme handed me by normal-school students. As Angela listened to the teacher's narration of the hardships of the Puritans, she evidently linked it up with an experience she had had not long before; and her little heart went out in sympathy for them. It all helped to make a vivid and interesting theme. She ended her story with these words: "And so they come to our own dear America."

Do I think that Angela will develop power as a writer? No. Even though she had talent, her poor, cramped surroundings would doubtless be too much for her. But what I am much more interested in is that the occasional writing of compositions such as this one will give her breadth of interest and sympathy, will

enable her in some measure to escape from the hard and oppressive environment where fate has thrown her, into the free, pure air of imaginative truth. Suppose now that Angela's teacher is so moved by a strong enthusiasm for the eradication of unidiomatic English that she can see little else in a composition; suppose that she takes this theme as the basis for a thorough drill in idiom; suppose that she makes Angela copy and recopy this story until it is faultless in matters of detail; what is likely to be the effect upon Angela's future writing? Is it not very likely that she will center her attention on those things upon which criticism falls most heavily? Will she not grow to think more of the *how* than the *what* in her future writing? Will she not gradually lose the imaginative glow which she first experienced and come to look upon writing compositions as drudgery? Will Angela under these circumstances get from the composition hour that which grammar, or penmanship, or dictation exercises cannot give? I think not.

What I have said of written compositions also applies to oral compositions. How many of you could center your attention upon the plot of a story if someone were halting you, or were likely to halt you, in the midst of your narrative, to correct some slip in English and to require you to explain why your expression was wrong. In thus overemphasizing matters of correctness in connection with the composition, we lose the higher discipline of the exercise.

Do I then consider the matter of correct idiom of slight importance? On the other hand, I consider this matter second in importance only to that of real composition. But the place for emphasis of correct idiom is somewhere else than in connection with the composition. I believe in setting apart a few minutes every day for drill in matters of correctness. It may come in connection with the grammar period, for in grammar we are consciously dealing with the shell of thought. It may come at the close of the day, when the teacher presents for discussion the grammatical errors of the day. A brief correction at the close of an oral recitation, or in passing comment on a written composition is helpful, but to step aside from the topic at hand to comment or drill on matters of form defeats the main purpose of either oral or written composition.

If the question arises as to how we can crowd such daily drill into the school curriculum, I should say that we can do this without crowding if we eliminate some of the nonessentials now taught in technical grammar. Of what real value, for instance, is it to the child to subdivide the conjunctive pronoun? The time spent on subclassification of this sort might much more profitably be spent in drill on English idiom.

Further curtailment in the subclassification of parts of speech should be made in order to make room for more sentence analysis, both oral and written, and by diagram. And this brings me to the discussion of my second major topic: *Are we making the most of grammar as a help to the child in his silent reading?* I believe that one of the most effective ways of developing the power of extracting the thought from the printed page is drill in sentence analysis. The drill should consist in showing the relation of the base and the modifiers of first rank. In analyzing long complex sentences, the essential thing for the child to do is to indicate the base of the sentence and the modifiers of the base, whether word, phrase, or clause. Much analysis of modifying clauses or phrases is beside the point, for the purpose of all analyzing is to develop the power rapidly to synthesize the parts of the written or printed sentence. The pupil should, therefore, be concerned with the sentence in its larger units, rather than in its details. Any system of diagramming which shows the relation of parts and at the same time does not mangle the sentence by transposing elements is most helpful in developing this power of rapid synthesis, as it enforces in pictorial fashion the relation of parts and at the same time gives the impression of the whole. Those systems of diagramming, however, which picture the sentence as if it were exploded, leave the impression of detail rather than oneness upon the mental retina, and, consequently, although training analytical power, do not train so effectively in rapid synthesis.

There are certain forms which the child meets in the reading of poetry and careful prose which he does not use in his own oral or written composition. There is a tendency in grammars and among grammar teachers to slight these forms. Thus, for instance, in the conjugation of the verb, the archaic forms are frequently

omitted, or if cited they are referred to in some insignificant paragraph or in a cursory way. The disappearing distinctive forms of the subjunctive mode are sometimes left out of consideration. Certain school administrators instruct their teachers not to teach the subjunctive mode. These omissions could be tolerated if the teaching of grammar had bearing upon composition only, but it should have a vital relation to literature as well. If the child's eye has not been opened to the force of unusual forms, he will likely miss much in his interpretation of sentences where these forms occur. He should be led to feel the atmosphere of reverence frequently suggested by the forms of the verb used with "thou." He should be enabled to feel the subtle suggestion of doubt or wish in the use of the distinctively subjunctive forms. To teach the subjunctive mode as a full mode containing chiefly indicative forms is worse than a waste of valuable time, but to let the pupil know of the extant forms of the subjunctive mode in their delicate shading of meaning or color is necessary to his full interpretation of literature.

I come now to the third topic of my discussion, *grammar as a disciplinary study*.

"I despise grammar, there is no certainty about it—one book will say one thing and another will contradict it; this of course confuses the class, and the teacher never knows what to do." These words of a school superintendent quoted by President Rigdon, of Winona College, are typical of what many school men are thinking concerning the perplexing subject of technical grammar. But worse than the conflict between grammars, to which the superintendent alludes, is the conflict of statements within the same grammar. In making a plea for a more self-consistent scheme of presenting grammatical facts, I do not for one moment wish to go back to that good old time when the orthodoxy of grammar had to be maintained at all costs; when the obstinate young heretic who dared to question a grammatical classification was told to read Lindley Murray's rule and be quiet; or when he was told a classification was so made because the Latin grammar requires it. Nor would I suggest for one moment the insistence on one point of view in the interpretation of a grammatical relation

when the logical relation is twofold, or when any one of several explanations is possible; as, for instance, in the sentence "Birds in great numbers fly over the forest," where "in great numbers" may be parsed as an adjective or an adverb phrase, according as to whether the pupil sees it emphasizing the mass of birds or their grouping in flight. Again, in the sentence "The brook went babbling," "babbling" certainly partakes of both the adjective and the adverbial offices. A teacher who compels the child to group in one way when he sees very clearly another possible interpretation is defeating the third fundamental purpose for which grammar is taught, viz., to stimulate clear, original thought.

But in nearly every grammar with which I am familiar are certain baffling inconsistencies of grouping which are wholly avoidable. Grammar is a science; it should and does lend itself to scientific classification. Yet in many grammars the parts of speech are classified in a most unscientific way. Very often concepts are blurred because the grammarian mixes two points of view. He starts out to classify by one standard, and before the classification is completed, drops this basis of classification and groups from an entirely different point of view. Such classification is unscientific, uneconomical, and confusing. Let me illustrate. Practically all grammarians agree that not the word's history, nor its frequent use, but its immediate function in the sentence should be the basis of its classification into one or another of the parts of speech. But what do many of these grammarians do after laying down this fundamental principle? They classify, sometimes according to frequent use, sometimes according to the history of the word or idiom, sometimes according to its immediate function in the sentence.

Out of a large number of illustrations which one might use I shall take one from an excellent grammar by well-known authors. On p. 15, we find this statement: "Words are divided into classes according to their use in the sentence." On p. 20, appears the definition of a pronoun, as follows: "A pronoun is a word that is used instead of a noun," with the accompanying explanatory statement: "The word pronoun means *for* a noun." The child sees that the pronoun performs the noun function within the sen-

tence but does not have the power of naming. On p. 106 of the same grammar we have a very clear explanation of the fact that pronouns usually perform one or more offices besides that of taking the place of nouns: they may show grammatical person by their form (personal pronoun); they may limit as adjectives (adjective pronouns); they may join clauses (conjunctive pronouns); they may indicate a question (interrogative pronouns). It is now clear to the pupil that if a word does any one of these enumerated things and does not have noun function, it is not a pronoun. If it indicates a question and does not stand in the place of a noun, it is an interrogative word of some classification, but is not an interrogative pronoun. The authors further substantiate this point of view by classifying under the general subject of adjective the interrogative and conjunctive elements of the following sentences. I quote the illustrations from the authors. "*What* cities were destroyed?" (*What*=interrogative adjective.) "We have not heard *which* army was victorious." (*Which*=conjunctive adjective.)

Turn now to p. 113. The authors are discussing kinds of pronouns. They classify as interrogatives, under the general head of adjective pronoun, the word "*which*" in the sentence, "*Which* road did he take?" and as conjunctives under the general head of adjective pronoun the words "*which*" and "*what*" in, "Do you know *which* road he took or *what* friend he left?" The grammar here gives the impression that these words are interrogative pronouns, although none of them answers to the definition of pronoun, and although they are exactly parallel with that of interrogative and conjunctive adjective as developed by the authors on p. 106. They seem to classify these words as interrogatives under the general head of pronouns because these same words are sometimes pronouns. In other words, instead of sticking to function within the sentence as the basis of classification, they have shifted their basis of classification, and now group these words from the point of view of what they may be in other constructions. The effect is to blur the pupil's conception of both adjective and pronoun and at the same time to make him wholly uncertain as to what basis of classification he should use in the future in determining

parts of speech. Without any fault of his own the pupil is thrown into a muddled condition of mind, harmful to clear, consecutive thinking. And I believe that grammar thus taught results in actual injury to the thinking process. Had I time, I could show you how the simple matter of the verbals is made by many grammarians needlessly complex and confusing because they group part of the time from the point of view of the history of the word, part of the time from the point of view of its function, and part of the time from the point of view of form.

More important than conformity between grammarians as to terminology, more important than change of grammatical nomenclature, is the presentation of grammatical facts in the individual grammar according to a self-consistent plan.